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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces the use of various classroom assessment techniques for evaluating teachers, suggesting how information gained from these assessments can improve college teaching practice. Classroom assessment can help instructors become more sensitive to individual students, create more awareness of where understanding is less clear, keep students more engaged and challenged, and model practices helpful to students' own teaching practice. Steps in this process include: developing questions one wants to ask about one's own teaching; selecting or developing classroom assessment techniques that best address those questions; administering the assessment tasks or strategies; interpreting the data; and using those data to plan the next teaching/learning experience. This paper discusses the importance of a course in authentic early childhood education observation and assessment techniques, which should involve modeling of appropriate classroom assessment and the process of utilizing information gained to best meet students' instructional needs. It describes how one college professor experimented with various classroom assessment techniques in order to develop and maintain a high quality learning experience in her classroom. She used classroom assessments to examine the extent to which graduate students met course objectives and to identify elements of the teaching/learning process that best meet students' instructional needs. (SM)

Holding Up a Mirror:
Classroom Assessment Techniques in a Graduate Early Childhood
Teacher Education Program

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NCA Presentation:

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Diane approaches me after class. Her voice trembles and her eyes point downward examining the cracks in the flooring. "I think I am going to like this class. I have been hearing a lot about authentic assessment, but I am not really sure what it means. I'm worried about the assignments; in the group activity we did the younger students were talking about things they were doing in their classrooms that are miles ahead of me. I haven't been a student in 17 years. How can I be as good as those young women? Should I even be here?"

I'm reading a set of paper on multiculturalism in education. The students writing addresses many of the main points of the assigned readings, but very few students meaningfully apply those points to their own classroom practice.

I walk over to a small group of students before class on the first day of the semester. This group of four are all students I have taught previously, and know by name. Three of the students are taking my course in addition to their final course which involves writing their Master's thesis. "So, how do feel about your (Master's) projects? Are you satisfied with your topic, and where you want to be with your planning?", I ask. Jackie looks up, smiles brightly and says "Yes, I am all set. I feel really good about being ready to complete my project." Jackie is a young, third-grade teacher. She was hired by a school district with an excellent reputation right out of undergraduate school, taught for a year, and began working toward her MAT. Her confidence about her final project does not surprise the students sitting around her. They, however, do not volunteer how their own projects were going.

Students are working in small groups to develop strategies for primary grade students to self-evaluate their math knowledge. As I move through the classroom, observing group dynamics and information shared, I become concerned that most of the students have misunderstood the task. I am caught off-guard because last semester's class caught on quickly to the same explanation and exercise. Do I backtrack with more explanation and examples, or should I extend the time-period for this exercise and provide more scaffolding with these small groups? For next week's class their self-assessment assignments are due. Will the grades on those assignments reflect their understanding of child self-assessment, or will they discourage the students on their way to understanding?

The vignettes above provide snapshots of the complex, dynamic process that teaching is at all levels; one which involves constant decision-making. Our graduate students in Early Childhood Education at Oakland University are teachers of young children during the day, and students in the evenings. They are as diverse in their styles, personalities and skills as the children they teach. The dynamic nature of the teaching and learning process and demands systematic ongoing evaluation and constant shaping and reshaping of teaching. To do so requires thoughtful observation and ongoing evaluation of the teaching and learning experience in the college classroom.

Assessment in university settings takes place at the institutional, school, department, and classroom levels. However, individual faculty are likely to find that assessment at the

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classroom level has the greatest impact on improving their teaching and student learning. In 1996, at an American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) Assessment Forum, I was introduced to their wonderful resources for studying one's own classroom teaching (AAHE, 1992; Angelo & Cross, 1993). Although, I used several of the strategies prior to this meeting, the AAHE resources served as a validation of my classroom assessment efforts, and offered a more systematic approach.

Although all college classroom teaching requires continuous self-study, a course in authentic early childhood education observation and assessment techniques holds one particularly accountable. This should involve the modeling of appropriate classroom assessment, and the process of utilizing the information gained to best meet the instructional needs of the students. It is within this context that I experimented with various classroom assessment techniques in order to develop and maintain a high quality learning experience in my college classroom. I used classroom assessments to examine the extent to which graduate students met course objectives, and to identify elements of the teaching and learning process the best meet the student's instructional needs. This paper introduces the uses of various classroom assessment techniques and suggests how the information gained can improve college teaching practice.

A variety of classroom assessment techniques can help instructors to be more sensitive to individual students, create more awareness of where understanding is less clear, keep students more engaged and challenged, and model practices helpful to the student's own teaching practice. The steps to this process are to:

- develop a set of questions one wants to ask about his or her own teaching,
- select or develop classroom assessment techniques that best address those questions,
- administer the assessment tasks or strategies,
- interpret the data,
- use those data to plan the next teaching/learning experience.

A systematic approach informs on different levels, providing information about how individual students are doing, or how they are responding to the course, how the class as a whole is doing, how well the presentation of particular topics and/or strategies promote understanding and application, and how well the course does in general to help students to meet a given set of objectives.

DEVELOPING QUESTIONS FOR CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

Angelo and Cross (1993) suggest that faculty improve their teaching focus by asking themselves about the "essential skills and knowledge" they are trying to teach, about whether or not students are learning those, and about ways to help students to learn better. Clarifying goals and objectives are often the place to begin for faculty and their students. Angelo and Cross (1993) provide several ways to do this with students. I try a combination of approaches in my courses; beginning with close examination of the course syllabi to be sure that course goals and objectives are really what were achieved the last time I taught the course.

My strategy for assessing goals is to list the lectures, participatory activities, readings, assignments, films on paper, and list next to each the objectives they are intended to meet. I then rank-order the objectives to enable me to eliminate an objective if the pace of the class is slower than the previous class. Students are asked to do some goal setting at the beginning of each class, and are asked to then match their goals to the course goals in the syllabi. Students discuss the "matches" and "mismatches" in small groups and note those on their papers. Listening in on the discussions, hearing some highlights with the whole class as a

representative reports on each small group's work, and reading the student's notes on paper, provides me and the students with an immediate sense for matching expectations. In addition, the end of each course, in a narrative course evaluation conducted by each student, I ask specific questions about the effectiveness of those particular experiences (lectures, exercises, demonstrations) in meeting those objectives. Noting what didn't "work" provides me with meaningful questions to ask in future classroom assessments. Formative classroom assessment techniques are administered periodically throughout the term to continue to gain information concerning how students are learning.

CHOOSING CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT TO FIT THE QUESTIONS

Choosing a classroom assessment task to administer in each class session is the best way to become systematic and include this type of reflection in your repertoire of teaching. However, begin with tasks that are easy to administer and that require less time to interpret the data. The examples below describe some relatively easy classroom assessments I used to answer specific questions.

- Open-ended exercises, like having students complete "Assessment is.....", or "Advocacy in Early Childhood Education is....." can provide a general sense about prior knowledge, attitudes, and interests.
- Discussion cards that list two or three comments relating assigned readings to the student's own classroom experience (most of our graduate students have teaching jobs) and /or class discussion are helpful. These are assigned for each class, and provide regular feedback about what students are gleaning from the readings, from class, and how they are applying their learning to their own classroom experience. The cards also allow student to ask questions or make comments privately.
- Journals are simply a longer version of the discussion cards. In courses that involve a practicum classroom experience, I assign journals because application is even more of a focus for those experiences. Longer entries allow students to elaborate on the connections between theory and practice and ask questions of themselves or comment on their classroom practice in relation to that. Reading and responding to journals is time-consuming, but extremely worthwhile in terms of knowing how and when to respond to each student's instructional needs.
- Word journals are helpful in classes where terms are important to the understanding of the material. Students simply keep terms, their definitions, and an example that illustrates what the term means as a mini-journal.
- Muddiest Point (Mosteller, 1989) is quick and easy. In classes where concepts are introduced, I ask students to jot their "muddiest point" - the concept or term that is least clear at the end of class - on a piece of paper. Reading their comments and making notes of the frequent misunderstandings tells me exactly where to begin the next class.
- Minute Papers (Wilson, 1986) provide an avenue to examine student opinions, attitudes, interests, and/or understanding as they are asked to write an answer to a question on an index card in a minute or two.
- How's It Going? is an adaptation of a final narrative course evaluation, where a few questions are pulled out to ask students mid-way through the course how things are going. Questions may involve the pace of the course, the clarity of information presented and/or criteria for assignments. This way you avoid finding out useful information too late for this group of students.

SOLICITING CLEAR, ONGOING FEEDBACK TAKES COURAGE

Most of us have experienced some harsh criticism from students, especially by way of anonymous, university-wide course evaluations. So why would you ask for this punishment weekly? In my view, asking students for feedback on a regular basis results in more positive, constructive, specific suggestions; in a sense, teaching students to be more effective consumers of the educational process. Focusing on elements of good teaching practice, helps one to maintain a proactive approach versus a defensive one, and keeps feedback from being taken too personally. The satisfaction that comes from regular, constructive feedback can be very rewarding.

GETTING STARTED

Beginning to develop a classroom assessment plan involves gathering some resources, encouraging a colleague or two to embark on this adventure with you, and trying a few simple exercises yourself. These techniques provide immediate rewards, so getting started is the hardest part of the process. Practice will prove how "painless" and fun to administer classroom assessments can be. These techniques help my students to know more about themselves as learners, and help me move closer to the "target" and model meaningful assessment graduate students in Oakland University's Early Childhood teacher education program.

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Why conduct classroom assessment?

- provides a systematic approach to continuous improvement of course delivery
- provides documentation of elements of instruction that work, thus informing colleagues
- provides students with models of systematic ways to examine one's own practice
- provides students with ongoing opportunities to reflect upon, and comment on their learning experiences, thus engaging them more fully and more meaningfully in their own learning

When to conduct classroom assessment?

- often - at minimum three or four times a semester; maximum is every course meeting

How to conduct classroom assessment?

- first, try some open-ended assessments like the "Muddiest Point", the "Minute Paper", or goal setting to begin to develop some more specific questions you would like to ask.
- next, examine your objectives and choose an appropriate technique given the learning objective. An activity in the next part of this session will provide you with examples.
- the following step is to analyze the results of the assessment and explore ways to improve teaching based upon the information gained
- begin with some easy to plan/easy to evaluate classroom assessment techniques and move to more complex techniques as you feel more comfortable

